



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### Iran

#### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution declares the "official religion of Iran is Islam, and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'fari (Twelver) Shi'ism." The Government restricts freedom of religion.

There was a further deterioration of the extremely poor status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period, most notably for Baha'is and Sufi Muslims. The country's religious minorities include Sunni and Sufi Muslims, Baha'is, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians. There were reports of imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on religious beliefs.

Government actions and rhetoric created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all religious minorities, especially Baha'is and Sufi Muslims. To a lesser extent, Zoroastrians, evangelical Christians, and the small Jewish community were also targets of government harassment. Government-controlled media, including broadcasting and print, intensified negative campaigns against religious minorities – particularly the Baha'is – following the June 2005 election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The U.S. government makes clear its objections to the Government's harsh and oppressive treatment of religious minorities through public statements, support for relevant U.N. and nongovernmental organization (NGO) efforts, as well as diplomatic initiatives towards states where religious freedom is a concern. Since 1999 the Secretary of State has designated Iran as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for its particularly egregious violations of religious freedom.

In 2003, the U.N. General Assembly passed Resolution 58/195 on the human rights situation in the country; it expressed serious concern about the continued discrimination against religious minorities by the Government. In 2004, the U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution condemning the human rights situation in Iran. In March 2006 the U.N. General Assembly adopted Resolution 60/171 expressing serious concern about the continued discrimination and human rights violations against religious minorities by the Government. Also in March 2006, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief issued a statement of concern about the treatment of the Baha'i community in the country. The Special Rapporteur's statement claimed that Supreme Leader Khamene'i has instructed security officials to identify and compile information on Baha'is.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 631,660 square miles, and its population was an estimated 69 million. The population was approximately 98 percent Muslim, of which an estimated 89 percent were Shi'a and 8 percent were Sunni, mostly Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchs, and Kurds living in the southwest, southeast, and northwest. Although there are no official statistics of the size of the Sufi Muslim population, some reports estimated between two to five million people practice Sufism compared to approximately 100,000 before 1979.

According to the country's most recent official national census, taken in 1996, there were an estimated 59.8 million Muslims, 30,000 Zoroastrians, 79,000 Christians, and 13,000 Jews, with 28,000 "others" and 47,000 "not stated."

Recent unofficial estimates provide larger numbers for non-Muslim minority groups. Baha'is, Jews, Christians, Mandaeans, and Zoroastrians constitute approximately five percent of the population combined. The largest non-Muslim minority was the Baha'i community, which had an estimated 300,000 to 350,000 adherents throughout the country. Credible estimates on the size of the Jewish community vary from 25,000 to 30,000. This figure represents a substantial reduction from the estimated 75,000 to 80,000 Jews who resided in the country prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution. According to U.N. figures, there were approximately 300,000 Christians, the majority of whom are ethnic Armenians. Unofficial estimates indicated an Assyrian Christian population of approximately 10,000. There also were Protestant denominations, including evangelical churches. The Mandaean Sabaeans, a community whose religion draws on pre-Christian gnostic beliefs, numbered approximately 5,000 to 10,000 persons, with members residing primarily in Khuzestan in the southwest. There were indications that members of all religious minorities are emigrating at a higher rate.

The Government estimated the Zoroastrian population had approximately 30,000 to 35,000 adherents; however, Zoroastrian groups claim an estimated 60,000 adherents. Zoroastrians mainly were ethnic Persians concentrated in the cities of Tehran, Kerman, and Yazd. Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the pre-Islamic Sassanid Empire and played a central role in the country's history.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Government severely restricts freedom of religion. The constitution declares the "official religion of Iran is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'fari (Twelver) Shi'ism." All laws and regulations must be consistent with the official interpretation of the Shari'a (Islamic law). The constitution states that "within the limits of the law," Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities who are guaranteed freedom to practice their religion; however, members of these recognized minority religious groups have reported imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on their religious beliefs.

Adherents of religious groups not recognized by the constitution do not enjoy freedom to practice their beliefs. This restriction seriously affects adherents of the Baha'i faith, which the government regards as a heretical Islamic group with a political orientation that is antagonistic to the country's Islamic revolution. However, Baha'is view themselves not as Muslims, but as an independent religion with origins in the Shi'a Islamic tradition. Government officials have stated that, as individuals, all Baha'is are entitled to their beliefs and are protected under the articles of the constitution as citizens; however, the Government continued to prohibit Baha'is from teaching and practicing their faith. Baha'is also faced discrimination in the workplace and are barred from government posts.

The tricameral government structure is ruled over by a supreme religious jurisconsult, or "supreme leader." The supreme leader, chosen by a group of eighty-three Islamic scholars who are elected to the Assembly of Experts, oversees the country's decision-making process. All acts of the *majlis* (legislative body or parliament) must be reviewed for strict conformity with Islamic law and the constitution by the Council of Guardians, which is composed of six clerics appointed by the supreme leader and six Muslim jurists (legal scholars), nominated by the head of the judiciary and approved by the *majlis*. The council does not have voting rights. The supreme leader is also advised by the Expediency Council, which has the authority to mediate disputes between Parliament and the Council of Guardians.

The Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance (Ershad) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) monitor religious activity closely. Adherents of recognized religious minorities were not required to register individually with the Government; however, their communal, religious, and cultural events and organizations, including schools, are monitored closely. Registration of Baha'is is a police function. The Government pressured evangelical Christian groups to compile and submit membership lists for their congregations, but evangelicals resisted this demand. Non-Muslim owners of grocery shops were required to indicate their religious affiliation on the fronts of their shops.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

By law and practice, religious minorities are not allowed to be elected to a representative body or to hold senior government or military positions, with the exception that 5 of a total 270 seats in the *majlis* are reserved for religious minorities. Three of these seats are reserved for members of the Christian faith, including two seats for the country's Armenian Christians, and one for Assyrians and Chaldeans. There is also one seat for a member of the Jewish faith, and one for a member of the Zoroastrian faith. While members of the Sunni Muslim minority do not have reserved seats in the *majlis*, they were allowed to serve in the body. Sunni members tend to come from the larger Sunni communities. Members of religious minorities are allowed to vote. All of the minority religious groups, including Sunni Muslims, were barred from being elected president.

All religious minorities suffer varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing. Reportedly, religious minorities are allowed to handle food and own food businesses, but in practice most Muslim conservatives will not eat food prepared by Jews. Consequently, Jews are discouraged from owning food businesses. The government does not protect the right of citizens to change or renounce their religious faith. Non-Muslims may not engage in public religious expression and persuasion among Muslims, and there are restrictions on published religious material. Apostasy, specifically conversion from Islam, may be punishable by death. While there were no reported cases of the death penalty being applied for apostasy during the reporting period, on November 22, 2005, unidentified persons killed a man who had converted to Christianity more than ten years earlier. He had allegedly received death threats over the past few years. Reportedly, his death was followed by repression of and threats against other Christians, including arrests of ten Christians.

Members of religious minorities, excluding Sunni Muslims, were prevented from serving in the judiciary and security services and from becoming public school principals. Applicants for public sector employment were screened for their adherence to and knowledge of Islam, although members of religious minorities could serve in lower ranks of government employment, with the exception of Baha'is. Government workers who did not observe Islam's principles and rules were subject to penalties. The constitution states that the country's army must be Islamic and must recruit individuals who are committed to the objectives of the Islamic revolution; however, in practice no religious minorities were exempt from military service. The law forbids non-Muslims from holding officer positions over Muslims in the armed forces. Members of religious minorities with a college education could serve as an officer during their mandatory military service but could not be a career military officer.

University applicants were required to pass an examination in Islamic, Christian, or Jewish theology, but there was no test for the Baha'i faith. All public school students, including non-Muslims, must study Islam. With the exception of Baha'is, the Government generally allowed recognized religious minorities to conduct religious education for their adherents, although it restricted this right considerably in some cases. The Ministry of Education, which imposed certain curriculum requirements, supervised these schools. With few exceptions, the directors of such private schools must be Muslim. Attendance at the schools was not mandatory for recognized religious minorities. The Ministry of Education must approve all textbooks used in coursework, including religious texts. Recognized religious minorities could provide religious instruction in non-Persian languages, but such texts required approval by the authorities. This approval requirement sometimes imposed significant translation expenses on minority communities.

The legal system discriminates against religious minorities. In 2004 the Expediency Council approved appending a note to Article 297 of the 1991 Islamic Punishments Act, authorizing collection of equal "blood money" (*diyeh*) for the death of Muslims and non-Muslims. All women and Baha'i men were excluded from the equalization provisions of the bill. According to law, Baha'i blood is considered *Mobah*, meaning it can be spilled with impunity.

Sunni Muslims are the largest religious minority in the country, claiming a membership of approximately five and a half million (eight percent of the population), consisting mostly of Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchs, and Kurds living in the Southwest, Southeast, and Northwest. The constitution provides Sunni Muslims a large degree of religious freedom, although it forbids a Sunni Muslim from becoming president. Sunnis claimed that the Government discriminated against them; however, it was difficult to distinguish whether the cause of discrimination was religious or ethnic since most Sunnis were also members of ethnic minorities. Sunnis cited the lack of a Sunni mosque in Tehran, despite the presence of more than one million adherents there, as a prominent example of this discrimination. Sunni leaders reported bans on Sunni religious literature and Sunni teachings in public schools, even in predominantly Sunni areas. Sunnis also claimed there was a lack of Sunni representation in appointed offices in provinces where they form a majority, such as Kurdistan and Khuzestan province, as well as their reported inability to obtain senior governmental positions. In addition, Sunnis charged that the Broadcast Corporation's program *Voice and Vision*, airs programming which were insulting to them.

In April 2004 Sunni *majlis* representatives sent a letter to Supreme Leader Khamene'i decrying the lack of Sunni presence in the executive and judiciary branches of government, especially in higher-ranking positions in embassies, universities, and other institutions. They called on Khamene'i to issue a decree halting anti-Sunni propaganda in the mass media, books, and publications; the measure would include the state-run media. The Sunni representatives also requested adherence to the constitutional articles ensuring equal treatment of all ethnic groups.

The Baha'i faith originated in the country during the 1840s as a reformist movement within Shi'a Islam. The Government considers Baha'is to be apostates because of their claim to a valid religious revelation subsequent to that of the Prophet Muhammad, but Baha'is do not consider themselves to be Muslim. Rather, the government defines the Baha'i faith as a political "sect," linked to the Pahlavi regime but Baha'is faced discrimination prior to the revolution. A 2001 Ministry of Justice report stated that Baha'is would be permitted to enroll in schools only if they did not identify themselves as Baha'is, and that Baha'is preferably should be enrolled in schools with a strong and imposing religious ideology. There are allegations that Baha'i children in public schools have faced attempts to convert them to Islam. The Ministry of Justice report also stated that Baha'is must be excluded or expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once their religious affiliation becomes known.

Baha'is may not teach or practice their faith or maintain links with co-religionists abroad. The fact that the Baha'i world headquarters (established by the founder of the Baha'i faith in the nineteenth century, in what was then Ottoman-controlled Palestine) is situated in what is now the state of Israel exposes Baha'is to official charges of "espionage on behalf of Zionism." These charges were more acute when Baha'is were caught communicating with or sending monetary contributions to the Baha'i headquarters.

Baha'is are banned from government employment and government pensions. In addition Baha'is were regularly denied compensation for injury or criminal victimization and were denied the right to inherit property. Baha'i marriages and divorces were not officially recognized, although the government allows a civil attestation of marriage to serve as a marriage certificate.

The Government allows recognized religious minorities to establish community centers and certain self-financed cultural, social, athletic, or charitable associations. However, the Government prohibited the Baha'is community from official assembly and from maintaining administrative institutions by actively closing such Baha'i institutions. Since the Baha'i faith had no established clergy, the denial of the right to form such institutions and elect officers threatened its existence in the country.

Broad restrictions on Baha'is undermined their ability to function as a community. Baha'is repeatedly were offered relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their faith.

Baha'i cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, administrative centers, and other assets were seized shortly after the 1979 Revolution. No properties have been returned, and many have been destroyed. Baha'is were not allowed to bury and honor their dead in adherence to their religious tradition. Baha'i graveyards in Yazd and other cities have been desecrated, and the government did not seek to identify or punish the perpetrators. Public and private universities continue to deny admittance to Baha'i students. In 2004, for the first time, Baha'i applicants were permitted to take part in the nationwide exam for entrance into state-run universities. However, for those students who passed the exam, "Islam" was pre-printed as a prospective student's religious affiliation on the form authorizing their matriculation. This action precluded Baha'i enrollment in the country's state-run universities since a tenet of Baha'i faith is to not deny one's faith. Only a few students were allowed to enroll. In 2005, after similar treatment, no Baha'i students were accepted. A statement posted on Ayatollah Safi's official website during the reporting period reiterated the policy that Baha'is must be expelled from university once their affiliation was known.

The Government monitored the activities of those it identified as adhering to the Baha'i Faith. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief became aware of a secret October 2005 letter written by the Chairman of the Armed Forces Command, Major General Seyyed Hossein Firuzabadi, acting on instructions from Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, to the Ministry of Information, the Revolutionary Guard, and the Police Force, which requested the agencies to collect and to provide to the Armed Forces Command all information about members of the Baha'i Faith. There were also reports the Association of Chambers of Commerce compiled a list of Baha'i members and their trades and employment. A May 2, 2006, letter from the Trades, Production, and Technical Services Society of Kermanshah to the Union of Battery Manufacturers shows further evidence of workplace restrictions as it asks the union to compile "a list of the names of those who belong to the Baha'i sect and are under the jurisdiction of your union."

In principle, but with some exceptions, there was little restriction of or interference with Jewish religious practice; however, education of Jewish children had become more difficult in recent years. The Government reportedly allowed Hebrew instruction, recognizing that it was necessary for Jewish religious practice. However, it limited the distribution of Hebrew texts, in practice making it difficult to teach the language. Moreover, the Government required that in conformity with the schedule of other schools, several Jewish schools must remain open on Saturdays, which violates Jewish law.

Jewish citizens were permitted to obtain passports and travel outside the country, but they were often denied the multiple-exit permits

normally issued to other citizens and faced numerous obstacles from officials to travel abroad. With the exception of certain business travelers, the authorities required Jews to obtain clearance and pay additional fees before each round trip abroad. Members of all religious minorities appeared to be emigrating in higher numbers even though immigration was illegal under Iranian law.

According to the U.N. High Commission for Refugees' (UNHCR) background paper on the country, the Mandaean Sabaeans were regarded as Christians and were included among the country's three recognized religious minorities. However, Mandaean Sabaeans regarded themselves not as Christians but as adherents of a religion that predates Christianity in both belief and practice. Mandaean Sabaeans enjoyed official support as a distinct religion prior to the Revolution, but their legal status as a religion since then was the subject of debate in the *majlis*, which has not been clarified. The small community faced discrimination similar to that faced by the country's other religious minorities. There were reports that members of the Mandaean Sabaeans community experienced societal discrimination and pressure to convert to Islam, and they often were denied access to higher education. Mandaean Sabaeans refugees reported specific religious freedom violations and concerns, such as being forced to observe Islamic fasting rituals and to pray in Islamic fashion, both in direct violation of Mandaean Sabaeans teaching.

Sufis within the country and Sufi organizations outside the country remained extremely concerned about growing government repression of Sufi communities and their religious practices, including the constant harassment and intimidation of prominent Sufi leaders by the intelligence and security services. Government restrictions on Sufi groups and houses of worship became more pronounced during the year covered by this report. Although laws governing Sufi practice were ambiguous, there are reports that the Government called for a full ban on the practice of Sufism. Since 1979, the numbers of practicing Sufis have soared, increasing tension with the Government.

The Government propagated an interpretation of Islam that effectively deprived women of some rights granted to men. Gender segregation was enforced generally throughout the country without regard to religious affiliation and could be burdensome for those who do not follow strict Islamic religious codes; however, as a practical matter these prohibitions have loosened in recent years. Women of all religious groups were expected to adhere to Islamic dress in public, although enforcement of rules for conservative Islamic dress eased in recent years.

In 1986 the Government issued a twelve-point contract to serve as a model for marriage and divorce, which limited the privileges accorded to women by custom and traditional interpretations of Islamic law.

Many female Muslims were seeking to eliminate laws and practices that discriminate against women, arguing that relegating women to a lesser status due to, *inter alia*, their being considered "deficient in reason" was not a precept of Islam, but rather a non-Islamic accretion to Islamic practices.

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

The property rights of Baha'is were generally disregarded, and they suffer frequent government harassment and persecution. Since 1979 the government has confiscated large numbers of private and business properties belonging to Baha'is, as well as religious material. Numerous Baha'i homes reportedly were seized and handed over to an agency of Supreme Leader Khamene'i. Sources indicated that property was confiscated in Rafsanjan, Kerman, Marv-Dasht, and Yazd. Authorities reportedly also confiscated Baha'i properties in Kata, forced several families to leave their homes and farmlands, imprisoned some farmers, and did not permit others to harvest their crops. In one instance, a Baha'i woman from Esfahan who legally traveled abroad, returned to find that her home was confiscated. The Government also seized private homes in which Baha'i youth classes were held despite the owners having proper ownership documents.

The Baha'i community claimed the Government's seizure of Baha'i personal property and its denial of Baha'i access to education and employment were eroding the economic base of the community and threatened its survival. On June 29, 2006 the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing found that government expropriations of property in Iran "seem to have targeted disproportionately" the property of Baha'is and other ethnic and religious minorities. He further mentioned that many of the confiscation verdicts made by Iranian Revolutionary Courts declared that "the confiscation of the property of the evil sect of the Baha'i [were] legally and religiously justifiable." There were recent reports of authorities forcing Baha'i businesses to close and placing restrictions on their businesses. Managers of private companies were reportedly asked to dismiss their Baha'i employees.

The Government continued to imprison and detain Baha'is based on their religious beliefs. The Government harassed the Baha'i community by arbitrarily arresting Baha'is and charging them with violating Islamic penal code Articles 500 and 698, relating to activities against the State and spreading falsehood, respectively. Often the charges were not dropped upon release and those with charges still pending against them reportedly feared re-arrest at any time. Most were released only after paying large fines or posting high bails.

In 2004, authorities initiated the destruction of the tomb of Quddus, a Baha'i holy site. Local Baha'is attempted to prevent the destruction through legal channels, but the tomb was destroyed in the interim. The Baha'is were not allowed permission to enter the site and retrieve the remains of this revered Baha'i figure. The house of Mizra Buzarg-e-Nuri, father of the faith's founder, was destroyed without notice.

According to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, since 1979 more than 200 Baha'is were killed, 15 disappeared and were presumed dead, and more than 10,000 Baha'is were dismissed from government and university jobs.

In 2004, a Baha'i optician in Hamadan was reportedly kidnapped and brutally attacked by five individuals, who threatened him with death if he did not recant his faith and convert to Islam. Local authorities were unwilling to pursue the case and a local judicial official reportedly told him "it would cost him [the victim] dearly" if he pursued his complaint against the assailants.

In 2004, for the first time, the Baha'i community wrote an open letter to the Government of the Islamic Republic, addressed to President Khatami, seeking an end to Baha'i-focused human rights and religious freedom abuses. Numerous anecdotal reports indicated a marked

increase in government persecution of Baha'is after this letter. Much of this anti-Baha'i activity focused on Yazd, presumably due to Yazdi Baha'is having presented Yazd intelligence-security officials with a copy of the letter.

In late 2004 and January 2005, nine Baha'is in Yazd were arrested and briefly detained, and their homes searched and some possessions confiscated. On January 14, 2005, authorities summoned, questioned, and released another Yazd Baha'i, and four days later on January 18, four individuals came to his home and beat him with batons, inflicting severe injuries to his face, back, and arms. The same individuals, equipped with batons and communication devices, also attacked the home of another Baha'i later that day. On that same day, these same persons went to the home of a third Baha'i and attacked him with batons, causing serious head wounds. This third Baha'i was attacked again on January 25; on January 27 his shop was set on fire.

In February 2005, the Baha'i cemetery in Yazd was destroyed, with cars driven over the graves, tombstones smashed, and the remains of the interred left exposed. Two days later, a gravestone was removed and left in front of a Baha'is home, along with a threatening letter. The Baha'i community filed a complaint with authorities at the national level, but no action was taken. These events coincided with the launch of a campaign of defamation against the Baha'i faith in government-controlled media.

In February 2005, two Baha'is were released from prison after serving almost fifteen years on charges related to their religious beliefs.

In March 2005, a series of Baha'i arrests and imprisonments began throughout the country. In Tehran on March 6 2005, intelligence officials arrested and took into custody three prominent Baha'is, and another was arrested and imprisoned on March 16. Agents conducted prolonged searches of their homes and confiscated documents, books, and other belongings. They were all detained without charge, and released after having posted bail.

On March 8 2005, one of the Baha'is previously arrested and briefly detained for having distributed an open letter from the Baha'i community to President Khatami, received a three-year sentence and was incarcerated in Evin prison. He did not have access to lawyers nor to any form of legal counsel. Another Baha'i previously arrested and detained, was tried in absentia and given a one-year sentence for the same alleged offence.

On April 25 2005, five more Baha'is were arrested and imprisoned, all members of farming families whose properties had been confiscated in the village of Kata, when they obeyed a summons and came to the court for hearings concerning their grievances. On May 3 2005, four more Baha'is from Kata answered a similar summons and appeared before a court in the same province. The judge asked them if they would relinquish their property, and when they refused, the judge ordered their arrest and detention. Later that month, all nine were released from prison after a business license was used as collateral.

On May 16 2005, nine Baha'is were summoned to appear before the office of the Public Prosecutor in the city of Semnan. They were charged with "creating anxiety in the minds of the public and those of the Iranian officials" and distributing "propaganda against the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran" for having distributed copies of the November 2004 open letter to various government officials. They were detained and subsequently released, with the understanding that they would appear for a hearing at a later date.

Between August 2005 and May 2006, eighty-seven Baha'is were arrested (but only eighty-six were detained). At the end of the period covered by this report, two remained in prison. Most of the others were never formally charged but they were only released after posting bail. For some, bail was deeds of property worth approximately \$11,000; others were released in exchange for personal guarantees or work licenses. Some were not allowed to resume working for six months after their detention. There were also reports of attacks on Baha'is by unidentified assailants.

In the first week of August 2005, fourteen Baha'is were arrested from several cities, including Tehran. They were held in incommunicado detention, and there was concern from several sources that they were at risk of torture or ill treatment. During the rest of August and during September, nine more Baha'is were arrested in various cities. On September 17 and 19, three were released on bail. On September 5, four Baha'is were sentenced to ten months of imprisonment for opposition to the government. On the same day, the homes of nine Baha'is were searched in Yazd, and books, computers, tapes, videos, and CDs were confiscated.

On December 19, 2005, the longest imprisoned Baha'i, Zabihullah Mahrami, died in prison of unknown causes. He was arrested in 1995 and convicted of apostasy in 1996. He was forced to engage in hard labor at the penitentiary and regularly received death threats. His family was told he died of a heart attack, but Mahrami was reportedly in good health prior to his death.

On January 15, 2006, three Baha'is from Kermanshah were arrested on charges of "involvement in Baha'i activities and insulting Islam." Their homes and four others were raided the same day and books, documents, and other items were confiscated. On January 16, the Revolutionary Court set property worth more than US\$30,000 as collateral for the three Baha'is, and they were released on January 20. On February 5, 2006, three Baha'is from Esfahan were arrested for coordinating Baha'i activities.

On March 18, 2006, Mehran Kawsari was released from jail without bail. He was tried in connection with the November 2004 open letter to then President Khatami that requested the restoration of human rights for the Baha'is and was charged with taking measures against the internal security of the government.

From May 9 to 11 2006, eleven Baha'i homes were raided in Shahinshahr, Najafabad, and Kashan but no arrests were made. On May 19, six Baha'i homes were raided in Shiraz, and notebooks, computers, books, and documents were seized. The homeowners were among the fifty-four Baha'is arrested that day. The individuals were mostly youths engaged in humanitarian service. With permission from the Islamic Council of Shiraz, they were teaching classes to poor children as part of a UNICEF program. On May 24-25, fifty-one out of fifty-four of the detainees were released. As of June 14, the remaining three had been released, initially for collateral payments of \$54,600 per person but in

the end solely based on personal guarantees.

On June 13 2006, one Baha'i man from Sanandaj was arrested and released on June 29 on unknown terms. There was an unconfirmed report of five more arrests in Shiraz, but no further information is yet available. On June 18, three Baha'is from Hamadan were arrested after government officials confiscated books, computers, and Baha'i documents, but they were released on bail on June 21. No details of the terms of their release were available. On June 21, one Baha'i from Baluchistan province was reportedly abducted, and authorities said they suspected criminal elements were involved. On June 28, one Baha'i was taken into custody and was being held in the Ministry of Information's detention center. This individual was previously arrested and released in August 2005.

The Government vigilantly enforced its prohibition on proselytizing activities by evangelical Christians by closely monitoring their activities, closing their churches, and arresting Christian converts. Members of evangelical congregations were required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which must be provided to the authorities. Worshipers were subject to identity checks by authorities posted outside congregation centers. The Government restricted meetings for evangelical services to Sundays and church officials were ordered to inform the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance before admitting new members to their congregations.

Conversion of a Muslim to a non-Muslim religion is considered apostasy under the law and is punishable by the death penalty, although it was unclear whether this punishment had been enforced in recent years. Similarly, non-Muslims could not proselytize Muslims without putting their own lives at risk. Evangelical church leaders were subject to pressure from authorities to sign pledges that they would not evangelize Muslims or allow Muslims to attend church services.

In previous years, the Government harassed churchgoers in Tehran, in particular worshippers of the capital's Assembly of God congregation. This harassment included conspicuous monitoring outside Christian premises by Revolutionary Guards to discourage Muslims or converts from entering church premises, as well as demands for the presentation of the identity papers of worshippers inside. In 2004, there were reports of the arrest of several dozen evangelical Christians in the north, including a Christian pastor, his wife, and their two teenage children in Chalous, Mazandaran Province. Many of those arrested were later released, and the pastor and his family were released after six weeks in detention. One press source reported that authorities ordered those jailed to stop meeting for worship and to "stop talking about Jesus." Christians continued to be subject to harassment and close surveillance. Low scale harassment of Armenian Christians were reported, including situating Shi'a Ashura sites near churches and schools.

In 2004, security officials raided the annual general conference of the country's Assemblies of God Church, arresting approximately eighty religious leaders gathered at the church's denominational center in Karaj. After fingerprinting and questioning, authorities released all but ten pastors later that day. Of these, nine were released. Assemblies of God Pastor Hamid Pourmand, a former Muslim of Assyrian Christian background who converted to Christianity nearly twenty-five years ago and who led a congregation in Bushehr, was the only detainee not released. Later that year, Pourmand, who was also a non-commissioned officer in the Army, was moved to a military prison. In late January 2005 he was tried in a military court on charges of espionage. On February 16, 2005, he was found guilty of espionage and sentenced to three years, and was transferred to Evin prison to serve his sentence. A military appeals court subsequently affirmed the verdict and the sentence. As a consequence, Pourmand faced automatic discharge from the army and forfeit of his entire income, pension, and housing for his family. In mid-April, the authorities abandoned preliminary hearings against Pourmand before a Tehran General and Revolutionary Court on two separate charges of apostasy and proselytizing, both capital crimes, reportedly after news of his trial leaked out to the international press. In May, he was transferred from Tehran to his home city of Bushehr to stand trial in a General and Revolutionary Court on these charges. On May 28, that court acquitted Pourmand on apostasy and proselytizing charges, and he was sent back to Tehran's Evin prison to serve out the remainder of his three-year prison sentence. In August 2005, there were reports that he continued to face pressure from prison officials to recant his Christian faith and return to Islam.

On November 22, 2005, a Muslim convert to Christianity, Ghorban Tori, was kidnapped from his house in the northeast and killed. His body was later returned to his house. Tori was a pastor at an independent house church of converted Christians. After the killing, security officials searched his house for Bibles and banned Christian books in Persian. In the previous week, according to some sources, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security arrested and tortured ten Christians in several cities.

On May 2, 2006, a Muslim convert to Christianity, Ali Kaboli, was taken into custody in Gorgan, after several years of police surveillance and threatened prosecution if he did not leave the country. He was interrogated and was held incommunicado. So far no charges have been filed against him.

In 2000, ten of thirteen Jews arrested in 1999 were convicted on charges of illegal contact with Israel, conspiracy to form an illegal organization, and recruiting agents. Along with two Muslim defendants, the ten Jews received prison sentences ranging from four to thirteen years. During and shortly after the trial, Jewish-owned businesses in Tehran and Shiraz were targets of vandalism and boycotts, and Jews reportedly suffered personal harassment and intimidation. There was one report of vandalism against a synagogue during the reporting period.

Numerous Sunni clerics were killed in recent years, some allegedly by government agents. While the exact reason for their killings was unknown, most Sunni Muslims in the country belonged to ethnic minorities who historically suffered abuses by the Government. During this reporting period, Sunni leaders reported abuses, including detentions and torture of Sunni clerics, and an unconfirmed report of a suspicious death of a Sunni cleric who had defied orders not to return to the mosque after his release from prison.

There were no reports of government harassment of the Zoroastrian community during the reporting period; however, the community remained unable to convene a Spiritual Assembly to manage its religious affairs for fear of official retaliation, and there were reports of discrimination in employment and education. In 2004, Zoroastrians were able to make, apparently without government interference, their annual pilgrimage to one of the holiest sites of their faith, the temple of Chak-Chak (near the city of Yazd).

Reports of government harassment and abuse of Sufis became prevalent during this reporting period due to the increasing intolerance towards the Sufi community from the Government. On February 13, 2006, police officers tried to close a Sufi house of worship, or *Husseinieh* in the city of Qom, sparking two days of clashes and violence. Qom officials stated the Sufis had illegally turned a residential building into a religious establishment. However, the establishment apparently had been built three years ago with municipal permission. According to some human rights groups, the Sufis, including many women and children, were peacefully protesting the order to leave the *Husseinieh*. The police attacked the Sufis in the building with tear gas and explosives, causing over 500 hospitalizations according to some sources and 100 injuries according to the Qom Governor, General Abbas Mohtaj. Members of the Fatemiyon and Hojjatiyeh groups, conservative Islamic groups, reportedly joined the police in first taunting the protestors and then attacking and beating them.

On February 14, 2006, the security forces demolished the building and neighboring houses, and more than 1,000 persons were arrested, according to several sources. Other sources close to the Sufi groups and human rights activists reported 2000 arrests. At least 173 were detained at Fajr prison and were reportedly tortured in order to extract confessions that would be read on national television. Those who were released had to sign agreements saying they would not attend Sufi gatherings in Qom and would present themselves to intelligence offices. Some reportedly were required to sign documents renouncing Sufism.

On May 4, a court sentenced fifty-two Sufis to jail on various charges in connection with the February incident. The defendants and their two lawyers were sentenced to a year in prison, fines, and seventy-four lashes. The lawyers, Farshid Yadollahi and Omid Behrouzi, were also banned from practicing law for five years.

The government carefully monitors the statements and views of the country's senior Shi'a religious leaders. Several Shi'a religious leaders have been under house arrest for years, including Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, who was released after five years of house arrest in 2003.

The Special Clerical Court (SCC) system, established in 1987 to investigate offenses and crimes committed by clerics and which the Supreme Leader oversees directly, is not provided for in the constitution and operates outside the domain of the judiciary. In particular, critics alleged that the clerical courts were used to prosecute certain clerics for expressing controversial ideas and for participating in activities outside the area of religion, including journalism.

On February 6, 2005, the special clerical court agreed to the conditional release (parole) of prominent dissident cleric Hojatoleslam Hassan Yussefi Eshkevari; he had served two thirds of his seven-year sentence and was therefore eligible for parole under the law. The cleric had been arrested in 2000, charged with the capital crimes of apostasy and "corruption on earth," in conjunction with speeches he had made at a 2000 conference on reform in Berlin.

Laws based on religion have been used to stifle freedom of expression. Independent newspapers and magazines have been closed, and leading publishers and journalists were imprisoned on vague charges of "insulting Islam" or "calling into question the Islamic foundation of the Republic." In 2002 academic Hashem Aghajari was sentenced to death for blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammed, based on a speech in which he challenged Muslims not to blindly follow the clergy, provoking an international and domestic outcry. In 2003 his death sentence was revoked by the Supreme Court, but the case was sent back to the lower court for retrial. He was retried on charges that did not include apostasy and was sentenced to five years' imprisonment, two of which were suspended, and five years of additional "deprivation of social right" (meaning that he could not teach or write books or articles). His time served was counted towards his three-year sentence; the court converted the remainder of the time to a fine. He was released on bail in 2004.

#### Anti-Semitic Acts

While Jews are a recognized religious minority, allegations of official discrimination were frequent. The Government's anti-Israel policies, along with a perception among radical Muslims that all Jewish citizens supported Zionism and the state of Israel, created a hostile atmosphere for the small community. For example, in 2005 many newspapers celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of the anti-Semitic publication *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Jewish leaders reportedly were reluctant to draw attention to official mistreatment of their community due to fear of government reprisal.

The Jewish community has been reduced to less than one-half of its pre-1979 size. Some of this emigration was connected with the larger, general waves of departures following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, but some also stems from continued anti-Semitism on the part of the government and within society.

In 2004, the country's Sahar 1 television station began airing a weekly series titled *For You, Palestine*, or *Zahra's Blue Eyes*, set in Israel and the West Bank. Produced in Farsi and subsequently translated into Arabic, this series depicted Israeli government, military, and civilian personnel harvesting organs from Palestinian children for the benefit of Israeli officials. Other anti-Semitic series shown on state-run Iranian television during this period included *The People of the Cave*, a supposedly historical drama series, and *Al-Shatat*. *Al-Shatat*, originally broadcasted by Hizbullah's Al-Manar television channel, portrayed Jewish persons as being responsible for most the world's problems, by conspiring to achieve political and economic domination over the world.

In April 2005, Ayatollah Hossein Nouri-Hamedani, one of the country's leading religious authorities, told a group of clerics that "one should fight the Jews and vanquish them," to prepare the ground and to hasten the advent of the Hidden Imam.

On April 13, Representative Moris Motamed, who represents Jews in the *majlis*, joined by the speaker of the *majlis*, complained that the state television was broadcasting anti-Semitic programs. According to the press, Motamed claimed that "insulting Jews and attributing false things to them in television serials over the past twelve years has not only hurt the feelings of the Jewish community but has also led to the emigration of a considerable percentage of the Jewish community." There were indications that anti-Semitic content in broadcasting decreased after these complaints.

The perception among some of the country's radicalized elements that Jews support Zionism and the state of Israel created a threatening atmosphere for the Jewish community. Many Jews have sought to limit their contact with or support for the state of Israel out of fear of reprisal. Recent anti-American and anti-Israeli demonstrations included the denunciation of Jews themselves, as opposed to the past practice of denouncing only "Israel" and "Zionism," adding to the threatening atmosphere for the community.

Since August 2005, President Ahmadinejad has pursued a virulent anti-Israel campaign, which created an even more hostile environment for the Jewish minority. In October 2005, the president called for Israel to "be wiped off the map". In December 2005, the president alleged that the Holocaust was a "myth." On December 16, 2005, the Friday prayer leaders endorsed the president's Holocaust statements and reported the statements were "the heartfelt words of all Muslims in the world". During this reporting period, there was a rise in officially sanctioned anti-Semitic propaganda in a reportedly coordinated plan involving official statements, media outlets, publications, and books. The rhetorical attacks also further blurred the line between Zionism and Judaism. This increasingly negative rhetoric, coupled with the tension surrounding the nuclear issue in the country, led to increased concerns about the future security of the Jewish community.

On January 26, 2006, the head of the Jewish community, Haroun Yashayaei, sent a letter to the president protesting his Holocaust denial comments. Yashayaei stated the comments and the recent Holocaust denial seminars have struck fear within the small Jewish community. On February 11, 2006 Moris Motamed, the Jewish parliamentarian, reported that the negative remarks were an insult to the Jewish communities.

#### Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

However, a child born to a Muslim father automatically is considered a Muslim. Baha'is were repeatedly offered relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their faith, and several Sufi Muslims reportedly had to sign forced renunciations of their faith to be released from prison following the February riots.

#### Persecution by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religious groups by terrorist organizations during the reporting period.

#### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The continuous presence of the country's pre-Islamic, non-Muslim communities, such as Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians, had accustomed the population to the participation of non-Muslims in society; however, government actions continued to create a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities and became significantly worse throughout the reporting period. The president's new agenda stressed the importance of Islam in enhancing "national solidarity" and mandated that government-controlled media emphasize Islamic culture in order to "cause subcultures to adapt themselves to public culture". Since August 2005 the government had intensified a campaign against non-Muslim religious minorities, and political and religious leaders issued a continual stream of inflammatory statements.

On November 21 2005, the domestic press quoted Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of the Guardian Council, publicly attacking non-Muslims, calling them "sinful animals" and "corrupt". The remark was widely criticized in the country, and the majles representative of the Zoroastrian community publicly condemned his remarks and was consequently charged with the "dissemination of false information, slander, and insult." At year's end, no case had been pursued against him.

Christians faced an increase in abuse and harassment. Reportedly, the president allegedly called for an end to the development of Christianity in the country. The small Mandaean Sabaeen religious community reportedly faced intensifying harassment and repression by authorities.

Since late 2005, Baha'is have faced an increasing number of public attacks, including a series of negative and defamatory articles in *Kayhan*, the official Tehran daily newspaper. *Kayhan* is a government-controlled newspaper whose managing editor was appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i. Radio and television broadcasts have also increasingly condemned the Baha'is and their religion, and since October 2005 they have launched a series of weekly anti-Baha'i broadcasts. These reports had the intention of arousing suspicion, distrust, and hatred for the Baha'i community.

Since the National Association of Chambers of Commerce began collecting employment data on Baha'is, have been reported problems for Baha'is in different trades around the country. Baha'is have also experienced an escalation of personal harassment, including receiving threatening notes, CDs, text messages, and tracts. There were reported cases of Baha'i children being harassed in school and subjected to Islamic indoctrination. Baha'i girls were especially targeted, with the intention of creating tension between parents and children.

There has been concern from several groups about the rumored resurgence of the banned Hojjatiyeh society, a secretive religious-economic group that was founded in 1953 to rid the country of the Baha'i Faith in order to hasten the return of the twelfth Imam or Mahdi. Though not a government organization, it is believed that many members of the current administration are Hojjatiyeh members and are using their offices to advance the society's goals. It was unknown, however, what role, if any, the group played in the recent arrests of numerous Baha'is throughout the country. Many Baha'i, human rights groups, and news agencies describe the goals of the Hojjatiyeh society as the pursuit of the eradication of the Baha'is, not just the Baha'i Faith. According to the *Encyclopedia Iranica*, however, the group's founder was reportedly distraught by violence against Baha'is. The group's anti-Baha'i orientation has reportedly widened to encompass anti-Sunni and Sufi activities as well. Rasul Montajabnia, a prominent member of the Militant Clerics Society – a key reformist clerical group-claimed that



Hojjatiyeh members have actually stopped their fight against the Baha'i faith and turned their attention to creating divisions between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, mainly as a means of fomenting chaos to bring about the return of the Mahdi.

Sufi Muslims faced an increasing "demonization" campaign. In September 2005, Ayatollah Hossein Nouri-Hamedani, as Islamic scholar in Qom, reportedly called for a crackdown on Sufi groups, labeling them a "danger to Islam". Five months later an attack occurred that involved police and paramilitary forces. During the riots, the paramilitaries distributed leaflets calling Sufis enemies of Islam, and the Qom governor accused the Sufis of having ties to foreign countries and creating instability. Articles attacking Sufis were printed in government-controlled, national newspapers, such as the *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* and *Kayhan*. On February 14, 2006, a *Kayhan* article quoted senior clerics in Qom as saying that Sufism should be eradicated in the city. During the period covered by this report, several anti-Sufi books were published.

Sunni Muslims encounter religious discrimination at the local, provincial, and national levels. Religious leaders reported widespread restrictions on their practice and abuses, including detentions and torture of Sunni clerics. They also reported bans on Sunni teachings in public schools and Sunni religious literature. The residents of provinces with large Sunni populations, including Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Sistan-va Baluchistan report discrimination and lack of resources, but it is difficult to determine what is ethnic-based discrimination and what is religious-based.

In June 2003, an interfaith delegation of American Christians, Jews, and Muslims traveled to meet with religious, political, and cultural leaders. In April 2005 an interfaith delegation of Muslims, Christians, and Jews paid a return visit to the United States, attending an interfaith conference in the United States.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The United States has no diplomatic relations with the country, and thus it does not raise directly the restrictions that the Government places on religious freedom and other abuses the Government commits against adherents of minority religious groups. The U.S. government makes its position clear in public statements and reports, support for relevant U.N. and NGO efforts, and diplomatic initiatives to press for an end to government abuses. The U.S. government calls on other countries with bilateral relations with Iran to use those ties to press Iran on religious freedoms and human rights.

From 1982 to 2001, the U.S. government co-sponsored a resolution each year regarding the human rights situation in the country offered by the European Union at the annual meeting of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR). It passed every year until 2002, when the United States did not have a seat on the Commission, and the resolution failed passage by one vote. The U.S. supported a similar resolution offered each year during the U.N. General Assembly until the fall of 2002, when no resolution was tabled. The U.S. government strongly supported the work of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Human Rights for Iran and called on the government to grant him admission and allow him to conduct his research during the period of his mandate, which expired with the defeat of the resolution at the UNCHR in 2002. There also was no resolution on the country at the UNCHR in the spring of 2003. In 2003 the Canadian government introduced a resolution censuring the country's human rights policies, which was passed by the U.N. General Assembly. The U.S. has supported Canadian-sponsored resolutions censuring the government's treatment of religious minorities. In 2004, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution expressing serious concern about the continued discrimination of religious minorities. The U.S. government remains supportive of efforts to raise the human rights situation whenever appropriate within international organizations.

On numerous occasions, the U.S. State Department spokesman has addressed the situation of the Baha'i and Jewish communities in the country. The U.S. government has publicly condemned the treatment of the Baha'is in UN resolutions, including one that passed in the General Assembly in 2005. The U.S. government has encouraged other governments to make similar statements.

Since 1999, the Secretary of State has designated Iran as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

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